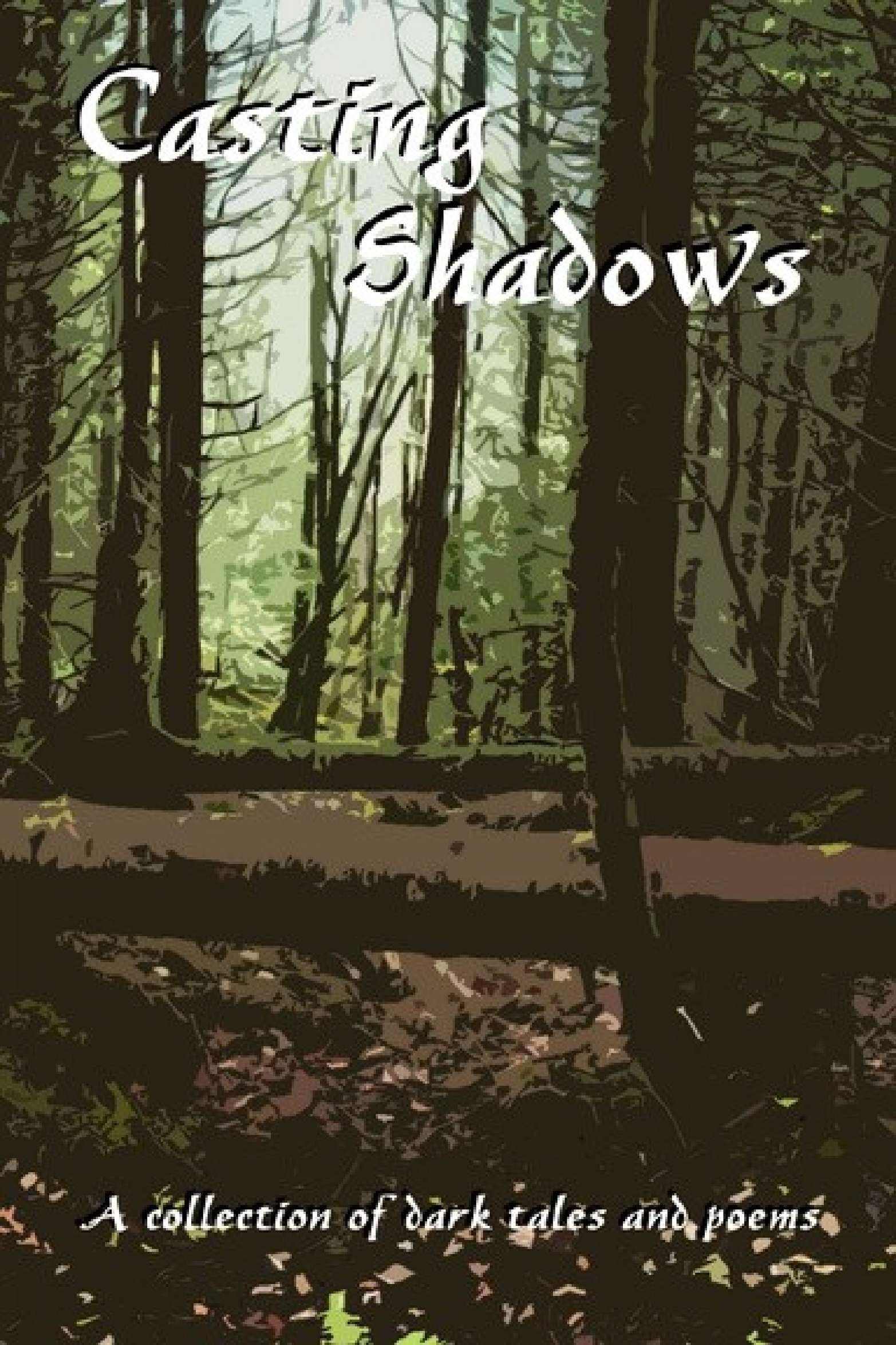
Casting
Shadows
A collection of dark tales and poems

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Cover photo by Joleen Kuyper. Cover design by E.J. Tett

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An Introduction

Jo Robertson

Come with me; follow the path into the darkness. Listen to the sound the stones make as you crush them with your feet, watch the shadows, see how they dance as the wind caresses the trees.

It may be midnight, it may be later. The moon is large and the frost brings mist from the ground. In the stark light the trees are skeleton arms stretching towards us. Anyone else would be afraid. But not me, not us. The darkness holds us like a womb and the light would burn us now.

Look, we cast shadows on the frozen ground. They elongate and stretch towards the trees. Watch how they dance on the edge of the forest. It is almost as if the shadow beckons us forward, into the darkness. It would be cowardly of us to turn back now, and who can tell what would be waiting behind us?

Take my hand, dear friend. Don't let the shadows frighten you. I can hear the tremble in your voice as we move through the trees but you shouldn't be afraid, there is nothing here that can hurt you.

Only the things you imagine have the power to bring the shadows to life…

Just the Dust

Ashes. Nothing left, just the dust swirling in the air. Too light to touch, but choking and dark. It blocked out the light.

Her voice was croaky, and it echoed as she called for help. There were no replies. Her mouth tasted funny. Blood mixed with the smoky taste of the dust. She swallowed. A wave of nausea came over her.

What happened? The question came to her mind suddenly. Immediately, others followed. She couldn't remember anything else either. Who am I? She wondered. For some reason the terror of that thought made her shudder more than the situation she found herself in.

She tried to move her legs. They were trapped under something. Whatever it was, it was heavy. The air was still too thick for her to see. She coughed, her chest hurt. She called for help again and again until her throat hurt too. There

was no answer. There was nothing; just her and whatever was pinning her down.

Her head hurt as well. A tear rolled down her cheek. I'm going to die here, she thought. She sobbed until her head felt it would burst and a mixture of tears and blood from her cuts rolled into her mouth. She wondered if her own blood and tears dribbling into her would save her from dying of thirst. She didn't think it would.

Her throat was too raw now to even shout and she didn't think she had the energy to cry. Strangely, as well as desperate and terrified, she felt bored.

Think! She told herself. I have a name, I have a life. I must have. No answers came. The air didn't hurt her nostrils anymore but she still couldn't see anything. She couldn't be sure if it was dark or the air was still clogged up.

I'm bored. What would I like to be doing? She asked herself. Something with my hands. Maybe I'm an artist? She wondered, then frowned. No. That wasn't right. Busy hands, always moving. Something to do with a computer, she realised. I type quickly. A hundred words per minute. How can I be so certain of that and not know my own name?

She felt like drifting off to sleep, tried to force herself to stay awake. Remember something else. Something that might help, she instructed herself firmly. There must be someone looking for me, missing me. I've been here hours, she thought. It must be hours. A mother or father, brother or sister, friend or lover? A child? She wondered. Am I gay or straight? How can I not know?

She tried to think of celebrities, which images turned her on. Angelina Jolie came to her mind. Lesbian? She wondered, but soon imagined both Angelina and Brad Pitt in bed, with her. In her mind they had faces, she did not. Bi, or bi-curious, she mused, forcing away the fear at not knowing what she looked like. "How can I know who they are and not myself," she muttered in a coarse whisper.

She tried touching her face to figure out what her features were. All she could feel was the dust and scrapes. Her nose felt big, she realised after she poked and prodded at herself more. And her lips were narrow. She felt down. Large chest, medium waist. Her legs were still painful, though it was more a dull ache now. She thought they were long but she wasn't sure. "Quite tall," she muttered. She still couldn't picture what she looked like. Her hair was dry with dust and matted with blood, and she couldn't remember what colour it was.

"What day is it? What year?" she asked herself aloud. Hearing her voice helped her concentrate. "What accent am I speaking in? Where am I from?"

"Ten, ten, ten," she said suddenly. "October tenth, two thousand and ten. That must be the date, today's date. Or maybe a date important to me." She could see her hands suddenly, inputting the date into a computer. Slim fingers. Today's date, she thought.

"Seven, seven, eighty-two," she said after a moment. My date of birth, she thought, something told her she was right. "I'm twenty eight," she said aloud, gravity in her voice, as if it would unlock the puzzle and set her free. Nothing happened.

I'm getting somewhere, she thought. If I can just work out who I am and why I'm here, maybe I can get out of here. She knew that she couldn't afford to go to sleep. Knew that could mean never waking up again.

She tried to focus on the image of herself tapping away on the computer keys, remember what data apart from the date she was inputting. Am I at work, she wondered, was there an accident? A terrorist attack maybe? There must be someone looking for me! "Help!" she shouted, her throat raspy and sore. No response, no sound, nothing. Just dark emptiness.

"Six-o-six," she said aloud then. A train, a train home? What route? What line? Victoria? "I'm in London," she said, nodding to herself. "London," she repeated. It felt good, to know where she was. The tube. Some kind of accident, I'm buried in a tunnel. They will come to dig me out. Why don't I have a mobile

phone? She wondered. She had nothing but the clothes on her back. No gadgets, no handbag, no purse or wallet.

Where is everyone else? If I was on the train it must have been crowded. There must have been other people. They can't all be dead, surely? Panic gripped her as she started to fear being given up on, her breathing became fast and shallow and she felt her eyes grow watery again. Can't cry, or I'll get dehydrated, she told herself as she brought her breathing under control, forced herself to calm down. I have to figure out how to get the hell out of here, never mind who I am, that can come later in a nice clean hospital bed with a shrink or whatever.

She took a few slow, deep breaths and leaned forward as far as she could until the pain was too much to bear. Holding her breath helped a little. Whatever was on her legs was metallic and very heavy. She thought they were probably broken; she had some feeling in them but couldn't manage to move her toes. A memory came back to her of having broken her leg at school; before being taken to casualty the teacher had taken off her shoe and sock and asked her to wiggle her toe. She could hear the teacher in her mind, speaking her name, but couldn't make out the word.

"Never mind that," she muttered to herself. "First things first." She thought that maybe it was a part of the train carriage that was on her legs. It was heavy and though her legs were probably broken she couldn't feel any wounds in them, no jagged shards poking out. She summoned up her strength and heaved, but she couldn't get the right angle, couldn't manage to shift it even the tiniest bit.

Spots appeared before her eyes as she exerted herself, and when they cleared as she took slow, deep breaths again she realised the air was clearing, there was a light in the distance somewhere. "Here! Please, help! I'm trapped!" she called as loudly as she could manage, which wasn't as loudly as she would have liked.

There was no response, no movement. No sound. Just a light in the tunnel, she thought.

She tried lifting again, then using her hands to tug at her legs but she couldn't get anywhere. The silence disturbed her more with every minute that passed. The light down the tunnel blinked a few times, then went off. Complete darkness again.

There weren't any animals either, she realised. There should be rats or something, surely, in the tunnels? There was nothing. Just her.

A wave of nausea came over her again as blood trickled down her throat from the back of her nostrils, and she gagged. Blood dribbled down her nose as well now, and she wiped it away with her sleeve. It too, was covered in dust.

She squirmed around some more, feeling for something that might be able to help her. A wedge of metal lay behind her head and she dragged it over her, little by little, and jammed it under the other piece, then rolled onto her side to push down on it with the weight of her body. She felt the pressure on her legs give way a little and once again reached for them with her hands, pulling them out. This time, she managed.

Which way? She wondered as she glanced around her. She wasn't even certain anymore which direction the light had been in; the darkness was disorienting. She lay back down, her legs on top of the sheet of metal now rather than beneath it, to get her bearings. She started to crawl in the direction of the light, dragging her legs.

She was definitely in a tunnel, she thought as she made her way along a solid wall. It suddenly gave way, prodding with her hands she realised she'd reached a flight of stairs. She hauled herself up a couple, found it excruciatingly difficult. Her legs were a dead weight behind her.

A few at a time she made some progress. There was still no sign of anyone else, dead or alive. Just the dust.

She reached a plateau. A floor that was smooth beneath the coating of ashes, it was easier to move along. She wasn't really thinking about anything but moving when the word iodine popped into her head. Iodine? She wondered. What's that about?

It was still dark, though not as dark, but she still couldn't see anything. The only difference was that now it was grey rather than black. A sickly kind of grey. She could just about see her hands, they were covered with sores, blood oozed out of her.

Suddenly she stopped; she heard something. Something scuttling, moving quickly toward her. She screamed as it passed over her hand. A huge beetle, maybe a cockroach. Just one. "Calm down, Lisa," she said aloud suddenly. "Lisa! My name! I'm Lisa!" A wave of elation hit her. "It's all coming back," she thought.

"Calm down, Lisa," she muttered again. Someone had said that to her. A man, older, her father perhaps? What had she been doing? She saw a newspaper article. Nuclear hostilities a possibility. She felt her panic on that day.

"Scaremongering," her father had said. "They said that all during the cold war, we're still here." She took the iodine tablets anyway, the ones they sent out. Bought more on the internet, dosed herself with them.

Conspiracy theories. Ten, ten, ten. Today's date. The end of the world. It was all over the internet. She looked at her hands again. The sores were getting worse, she thought. Even iodine couldn't put off the inevitable forever. She'd run for the tunnels, not to catch a train. To hide from the blast. None of her friends had believed her.

She looked around again. Knew where she was. London, St. Pancras. Except there was nothing there. Just dust. She heard another cockroach scuttling around nearby. More of them, behind her now. They were coming for her. She pulled herself farther along, but they came nearer. She winced as a piece of skin

peeled off the palm of her hand. Heard the roaches eating it as she moved onward.

Monsters

She prowled through the house in the darkness,
relishing the power that the night gave her.
She was a cat burglar and a super spy
and a vampire.

A sudden crash of thunder made her jump and gasp,
lightning flashed and illuminated the room.
She was hiding behind the sofa, a frightened little girl.
She was fifteen and vampires aren't real!

The lightning stopped, the thunder growled
and rumbled in the distance like a monster.
Monsters are real. She knew that.
She was a werewolf, a demon, a witch.

Nothing to hurt her,
not in the darkness.
She owned the night.
Now was her time.

She crept up the stairs,
avoiding the fourth one
- that one creaked. She was an Amazon,
a Valkyrie, afraid of nothing.

She was here to kill a monster. At the top of the stairs
her confidence waned. Thunder boomed, loud enough
to wake the dead. She held her breath and waited.
Pleaded in her head.

Lightning flickered behind the curtains
of the hall window. On, off, on. Gone.
She moved on.
Nobody can see who you really are in the dark.

She opened the bedroom door,
winced at the creak,
though if the thunder hadn't woken him…
She was a superhero, a Goddess and justice for all.

He slept in his bed while a storm raged outside.
His skin was wrinkled and covered in age spots;
his head was covered in grey.

He was an old man, a monster, and deserved to be dead.

She sang a lullaby to him as she crept closer.
Softly, sweetly, for him and herself.
"It's raining, it's pouring, the old man is snoring.
Bumped his head and he went to bed, and couldn't get up in the morning…"

She hit him with a bedside lamp. Hard.
Thunder crashed, rain hammered at the window
and the lightning lit up the room.
She was fifteen and scared and monsters are real.

Roses

Roses. That's what it was.

She'd been smelling it for days now in the old house and it was making her stomach turn more and more. She pulled the sleeves of the cardigan around her as she walked about the place. Dust danced in the shafts of cold sunlight through the broken windows and the smell of age that permeated the place made her wrinkle her nose.

But it was the roses that bothered her. Sweet, cloying and insistent, as if someone was standing directly behind her with a bunch of them. The thought made her turn around quickly and she flushed at her own stupidity when she saw nothing but the empty hallway behind her.

She moved through to the kitchen where she had left the plywood. There was so much to do at the old house before James got there at the weekend; standing around imagining things wasn't going to help. She gathered up the

hammer, nails and wood and marched back to the hallway to board up the broken windows.

The house had only belonged to her a month, only a month since she had signed the documents at the solicitors dealing with her Uncle's will. She hadn't known him well and his death hadn't affected her very much until she had heard she would inherit his property. This old place had belonged to her maternal grandparents and had stood empty since their deaths eight years ago. Her uncle's work meant he didn't have the time or the inclination to spend his weekends out here patching up windows and re-hanging doors.

Up the ladder again, nails held in her mouth, wood and hammer under her arm she worked for most of the afternoon, until the fading sun forced her down for the evening. She was halfway down the ladder when the smell drifted across her face in a sickly cloud. Roses again. She stood in the dusty silence watching the specks spiral to the ground in the dim sunlight. Roses, strong and so very sweet… she held her breath until she was out of the dining room and back into the kitchen .

She woke the next morning with a pounding headache, the airbed she was sleeping on had half-deflated and her hip-bone ground against the bare floorboard painfully. She groaned and sat up. Why had she decided to stay here when there was a perfectly good hotel five miles down the road? she asked herself as she pulled herself to her feet. Money, it was always money. James had argued that they should just sell the place, make a tidy profit and buy their own little place in the city – something they'd never dreamt of affording. But one visit to the house had changed her mind; there was something gloriously homely about the place, vast as it was. From the porch that ran around the house to the sweeping, beautiful staircase that dominated the hallway, to the overgrown but rangy gardens, she had fallen in love with the whole place. She couldn't explain that to James, he loved minimalism and contemporary lines and it had taken a lot of persuasion to convince him that to renovate the place would be the

ultimate plan. She still expected another fight this weekend. Although she'd spent the whole week boarding up the cracks and painting over the intimidating old flock wallpaper she knew that this was no more James's house than the little apartment in the suburbs they'd shared had been hers.

The thought of another painful discussion about their marriage made her headache increase its assault. There were things that needed to be said that neither of them wanted to say, but she feared that this house would be the issue that would force those words to the surface.

She walked down the stairs and the smell of roses hit her straight away. She waved her hands in front of her face to try and disperse it and carried on towards the large dining room. She stopped in the doorway suddenly, a small cry forcing itself out and echoing around the high ceilings.

Rose petals trailed across the floor to the centre of the room. Where there would be a table in future lay a pile of petals, bright orange ones. She ran to the middle of the room and kicked the pile of petals, scattering them across the wood floor and sending them dancing through the air on the light breeze.

"James?" she shouted "Are you here?" …Silence answered her. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and punched in his number, as it rung she listened out for the telltale noise of his ring tone echoing through the empty house and betraying his location.

"Hello?" he answered. She could hear typing in the background; he was in the office twenty miles away – just where he was supposed to be. She spoke to him briefly, trying to steady her voice so he wouldn't worry .Once she had hung up she began to walk around the house, looking for places an intruder could have entered. There was nowhere. Other than the small windows she had boarded up the house was solid, secure and perfectly quiet.

She sat in the kitchen drinking tea from a chipped mug. The house wasn't haunted, that was ridiculous. Nobody had got in – the windows were thick and she would have noticed broken glass. There was nobody else in the house – the

floors were old and creaked as she moved about the house, she would have heard someone. Besides, the house didn't feel bad. She smiled at herself for sounding like a new-ager, but the place felt good, not like the cramped apartment she had called home for the last three years. This place felt like it could be home.

Hammer in hand she prepared to carry on with working as if nothing had happened. She tried to ignore the nervous fluttering in her stomach as she walked about the place. She glanced into the dining room and gasped. The petals were gone, not a trace of the flowers remained, except for the scent which was so strong her eyes began to water. She coughed as the scent permeated her throat and burned. She turned on her heels and ran for the front door, but had not gone more than three steps when the cloying scent disappeared without trace. She stopped and turned around slowly, hearing the floorboards groan under her feet as her weight shifted. The room was empty. Once again it smelt of dust and neglect, just like the rest of the house.

No, wait. She stopped herself from leaving the room as she noticed the thing on the floor. It was tiny, no more than an inch across. She stooped low to study it and touched it carefully with her fingers. They came away red, the consistency of the spot was sticky. Blood.

She backed out of the room towards the kitchen, tripping over her feet as her pace increased. By the time she reached the kitchen sink she had been running. The tap was jerked on and she scrubbed her hands until they were raw, her breath catching in her throat as her fear struggled to escape. As she turned the tap off she listened for any noise, any creak that would betray an intruder. There was nothing but the insistent quiet. Even the birdsong from the trees around the house had disappeared. She was alone.

She forced herself to the kitchen table and sat down, jumping sharply at the noise that echoed through the room as she dragged the old chair out to sit on. She could leave, she thought. Leave and not come back. Sell the place and go

back to the city to the apartment. Get pregnant, have kids that breathed that smoggy air without questioning it.

That thought made her get up again. That was James's wish, not hers. She needed this place. It belonged to her. She forced her unwilling legs to carry her down the hallway and back into the dining room where she'd left her tools. She took a deep breath and entered the room. Her eyes fixed on the blood again. It had been joined now by a single orange rose petal. She felt her heart hammering in her chest as the fear surfaced again. She grabbed a small dust-sheet and threw it on the blood, covering it completely. There, she thought. No more blood. No more petals, just painting. She picked up her paint-roller and, brandishing it like a sword, started to climb the ladder again, ignoring the insistent rolling of her stomach and the smell of roses that had begun to drift into the room again.

♦

The sun was beginning to dim by the time that James pulled into the long driveway. He could see her on the ladder, framed by one of the ugly picture windows. He sighed and killed the car engine. He looked at the small cluster of bags on the passenger seat and hoped what he had bought for her would do the trick, he didn't want another argument. He just wanted them to be together again.

He crept up the driveway with difficulty. The unmade road was full of potholes and mounds of renegade plants that had forced their way up through the gravel. His loafers slipped on the stones awkwardly. The presents he held in his hands made it difficult to balance and twice he slid, almost losing his footing completely but managing to right himself at the last moment.

The front door was propped open to let in the summer warmth. James walked carefully into the dining room. He wanted this to be a big surprise for her.

♦

She turned as the floorboards creaked. James smiled at her, framed in the large empty dining room doorway. His left arm was sagging under the weight of two large holdalls. His right was behind his back. She left the roller in the large paint can and climbed down the ladder quickly to greet him with relief. She wouldn't be alone in the house tonight after all!

The warm greeting died on her lips as he revealed what he was carrying in his right hand. The huge bouquet of gaudy orange roses that he revealed with a flourish made her pull back in a sudden rush of horror. She held the ladder for support as the scent surrounded her again, making her feel dizzy and nauseous.

"What's wrong, honey?" he asked "I thought you'd be pleased to see me!" He dropped the holdalls; they hit the floor with a meaty thump.

"I am…" she lied, trying to steady her voice. "I'm surprised, that's all. You're not supposed to be here until tomorrow." She backed towards the toolbox.

"Aren't I even gonna get a kiss then?" The words were light but his voice was heavy and dull. She could see his face clouding as she moved back from him.

"Let me pack everything away first!" she laughed with false levity, her hand reaching for the toolbox.

He lunged at her as her hand reached the plastic box, knocking her backwards onto the hardwood floor. Her scream echoed through the house as she struggled to pull his hands from her throat.

"James... please," she choked as she struggled. His face was implacable and set. He wasn't hearing her any more, there was no recognition in his eyes.

"I didn't want it to be like this but it has to be. We'll be together, hon," he explained calmly as he held her. "This place would tear us apart, I can't have that, this is for our own good. I love you more than anything and I can't let you go." The hands clawing at his to try and release their grip were getting weaker. His sweat dropped onto her desperate face.

The sudden wind barely registered with him until the plywood exploded from the window-frames, showering him with splinters. He scrambled up, releasing his grip on her throat. She crawled away coughing and hitching breath in painfully.

She slumped on the floor and watched as the huge ladder began to topple. The paint cans rolled to the edge of the ladder platform and fell heavily. James looked up just as the can connected with his forehead, then he fell too. He landed face-down in the pool of paint, the blood from his head wound flowing swiftly and creating a marbled pattern in the emulsion.

She smelt roses again. Stronger than ever. The bouquet was covered in paint and a few petals floated in the small stream of blood and paint that was creeping towards the doorway.

The house was silent as it had ever been. Even her stunned sobs made no echo across the high ceilings. The smell of roses drifted unchecked throughout the cavernous rooms.

Grassy Graveyard

The grass grows slowly all around,
up through the cracks in the ground,
engulfing grey matter forever.

Years of long forgotten tears
are now just schoolgirls' fears;
in this new era of indifference.

Tears shed for loved ones lost
frozen in last year's frost,
show the cracks and crevices of our souls.

Broken pieces lie all over,

like hearts of long ago.
From the tears they had no cover
and the grass began to grow.

Room with a View

All alone. The room is empty; the window has been boarded up. Huddle into the corner. There's nowhere to hide... Just keep small and quiet. Don't breathe. Close your eyes and they won't find you.

The light bulb blinks on and off, there's no shade, just a bulb covered in dust. Listen. You can hear the filament in the bulb crackling. Don't look.

The light starts to swing violently, sending strange shadows around the room. Your own shadow looms large over your huddled body.

Cower away.

It must be a draught that makes the bulb move on its own... don't imagine unseen hands or worse...

Sudden silence. Don't breathe, don't look!

The light goes out with barely a sound and the room is plunged into utter darkness. A gasp. Was that you?!

Eyes open wide now, staring wildly into the black, looking at nothing, there's nothing there! Wait... shh...

Your skin crawls, hairs stand on end, a prickle of fear... and something touches your hand. Jump up! Don't scream. Hands brush each other frantically, there's nothing there, calm down! Blink into the darkness, thrust your hands under your arms, don't let anything else touch you.

Breathe slowly.

Your heart beats painfully in your chest, blood thunders in your ears. Too loud! You can't hear, can't see what might be there in the dark...

You stand rigid. Until you remember the window...

Feel along the wall... careful... small steps, light desperate touches, hands shake as they pat the wall. There... the window. Feel the edge of the board? Rough... covered in cobwebs. Don't freak.

Grip the board, force fingers into gaps too small, eyes open painfully wide and staring at darkness. A deep breath and pull.

A crack. It's working! Desperate tugs, you can see now, the light creeps in... don't look round. Footsteps scuff then fall silent outside the door.

A strangled, fearful sob escapes your lips. One more tug at the board rips it from the frame. Weak light fills the room. Stagger backwards, drop the board... Behind you the door handle turns, look away back to the window.

The face appears suddenly, looming at the glass! The eyes are hollow, the mouth twisted into a grin, you stare, frozen in terror. A heavy hand falls on your shoulder.

Scream.

The Beach

We walked along the beach, me and you,
like we had thousands of times before;
the tide was low and we slid
down the rolling shelves of pebbles.
We were alone, not together that time,
the wind caressed
the empty space where we used to lock together.
Words were said and I ran up the hill of stones
away from you and the sea behind you.
I saw it touch you, hold
your legs like new lovers touch each other
lightly.
As I ran, you tried to follow me;

You couldn't climb the shelf of stones.
I watched as the pebbles slipped silently into
your battered shoes.
If I had waited for you to pull yourself up,
we both would have fallen.
It's better this way.

We Saw Him

I walked past him but I wasn't the only one who did. She almost tripped as she tried to pretend she hadn't seen him, that he wasn't there.

We didn't talk about it. We didn't talk about anything really. Just the weather. Dreary.

Over coffee, we glanced at each other, knowing we'd have to speak of it, of him, if our eyes met.

"You saw him," she said, her voice trembling as much as the hand she used to wipe the cappuccino froth off her top lip.

I didn't answer for a moment. I sighed. A tear began to build up in her eye. "I saw him," I admitted. She wiped the tear away.

"I thought it would stop," she mumbled. "After what we did. I thought it had stopped." She stared into the empty cup, and at her fingernails, avoiding my eyes again.

"Yeah," I sighed, thinking about taking her hand to comfort her. "I don't know what else to do," I said. It was the truth. I was an enthusiast, not an expert. Well, I had been an enthusiast.

"If it doesn't stop, I'll kill myself," she said.

I shook my head. "Don't say that," I told her.

"It's not an empty threat. I mean it," she shrugged. The gesture seemed so matter of fact for the statement that went with it. It brought a lump to my throat. I knew she wasn't lying.

"You were able to ignore him today," I protested. "That's good."

The tear was starting to form again. She made no move to wipe it away. "I almost broke my neck," she replied.

"Stop," I told her. "Just stop. So we saw him. So what?"

"So he's still watching us," she said. The tear rolled down her cheek, followed by another. "He's never going to stop, never going to leave us alone."

"Maybe we just need to forget about him," I suggested, wishing she would wipe the tears away.

More tears, on both cheeks now. I was suddenly feeling more anger than pity. "How, when he's there all the time?" she asked.

"Jesus, I don't know," I snapped. "Just ignore him! Talk to each other, look at each other, not off into the shadows!"

"It wasn't a shadow he was in today. It was broad daylight!" she argued back.

"So?" I asked, raising my voice. "He's just there. He can't talk to us. Can't hurt us. He has no goddamn power! So let him stand staring wherever he wants!"

She burst into tears, I realised people were looking at us. Judging us. Affair, I read in their gazes. If only they knew...

♦

Four months earlier, we had met through a website. Chatted online for a while. Found we had a lot in common. It was a month before we realised we lived

near each other. Arranged to meet for coffee. Wandered around together, visited the shops in the old part of town, where no one we knew would see us.

"I've always wanted to try it," she confided in me as she leafed through the heavy book with the leather cord binding, when we were back in my house.

"Me too." I grinned like a schoolboy. "It could be fun to try it, together."

"You know all the precautions we have to take?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied. I was pretty sure I did...I had read that chapter, once. Some time ago.

"You prepare then," she said, handing me the book. I skimmed through it, set up the room.

He was magnificent, when he appeared. When we made him appear. We felt powerful that night. Like gods. His skin glowed a bright orange, but the fire in his mouth was white hot.

It was only when I realised my clothes were singed that I realised I'd missed a step in the binding. Her hand caught fire as he broke free of the circle. I uttered the rest of the words as I fumbled in the book, but it was too late to make him go away completely. Too late to banish him.

She saw him more than I did, at the start. Lurking, watching. He seemed half gone, transparent. He couldn't hurt us, but he was there.

We went to an expert. She did everything she could. We thought it was enough. Until today, when we saw him as we walked down the street.

♦

She threw her things into her handbag and left the cafe. I had to pay the bill, and when I got to the street I couldn't see her. I called her name, but there was no answer.

I guessed left, and hurried off in that direction. Thought she might have gone to catch a train. I didn't want to leave things like that. It was my fault more than hers, though she was taking it harder. Finding it more difficult to cope.

A throng of people stood along the platform. I felt a wave of nausea come over me as I pushed through them. Below on the tracks was her body. Standing over it, looking menacingly at me, there he was.

Around the Campfire

The fire crackles and flames dance
orange and yellow and red.
The clouds reveal the moonlight
and wolves howl in distant woods.
Darkness has descended here
and things come out in the night.

Warnings to all, beware the night
for things come out to dance.
Strange things that exist around here
with fangs and eyes all red.
Evil creeps from the dark woods
and it rejoices in the moonlight.

These creatures bathe in moonlight,
dark creatures of the night.
Only by day do they stay in the woods,
night is their time to dance.
So hide behind the fire so red,
rest assured of your safety here.

Stay, stay, stay, we're all safe here…
Everything's lit by moonlight!
The flames of the fire burn orange and red
and give light to the darkness of night.
Don't be afraid, we can still dance.
Just please keep away from the woods.

Terrible things happen in the woods,
things that don't happen out here
while flames from our fire still flicker and dance…
The clouds cover the moonlight
and once more we're plunged into night.
Through the trees the eyes glow red…

The fire still burns though now blue not red
And sinister things emerge from the woods.
Pray for the morning and the end of the night
when we'll be free from all things here.
Clouds move once more to reveal the moonlight
and the creatures come forth to dance.

They dance, and kill, and red blood glistens
in the moonlight. The creatures from the woods
are here and feast long into the night.

Omen

ꕥ

When Ruth saw the whale she knew it was an omen. It had beached itself on the wide stretch of sand and was already being circled by gulls. Too late to save it now, she smiled ruefully.

The sun had disappeared days ago, replaced by a brooding grey half-light. Mist caressed the edge of the cottage and crept stealthily under the doors to the kitchen. She had tried to counter the creeping darkness by leaving all the lights on. But when the electricity sputtered and died she had to admit defeat. She had cried in the empty grey-light, her voice carrying all the way across the expanse of sands outside the cottage.

There were still birds, the gulls had proven that. But her dogs and cats had succumbed to the infection three weeks ago. She hadn't seen any other humans since the televisions went to static a week and a half ago. Still she had continued

to switch it on, half-expecting Eastenders to continue when the world around it was dying.

The cottage was isolated on the peninsula. Originally she'd thought that was why she hadn't become ill. But that was before Karen.

They'd watched the television together as the Prime Minister urged people not to panic. He looked rheumy and cold in the broadcast; his skin was a dull grey. Karen had told her she'd seen on the internet how this had all started – apparently there had been a meteor and the government had hushed it up. Ruth had laughed at her and told her not to believe the crap they post on those blogs. But now, in the strange half-light of the dawn she believed it completely.

Karen had died the same day. In Ruth's front room. She had sickened and shrivelled in front of Ruth's eyes. By evening there was nothing left but a shell, a papery sculpture of mummified skin. She had lifted Karen carefully – she was light as a feather, and put her in the back garden. She hadn't looked out of the back window for the rest of the afternoon but by evening the only thing that remained was a silver pendant and a small pile of teeth. Ruth didn't like to think about what she was breathing in every time she left the cottage.

She walked out of the back door. The silence was no different than when she had occupied a world of the living, but for the lack of planes in the sky it could have been any other day. She trudged over to the whale, shivering as the cold sand burrowed beneath her toes.

It was already a shell. She touched it tentatively and the papery shards of its skin disintegrated and were carried away on the breeze. She might be the last one left, she thought. Clearly she was immune to whatever it was – she'd been around the animals before they died, Karen had shrivelled in front of her and still, here she was – as healthy in body as she'd ever been.

She looked back at where the cottage and its small garden should be. The mist had enveloped it completely; all she could see was the beach, the dead

grasses hanging disconsolately from the dunes. The sea foamed a bleak grey, the tide on the turn. She saw the swirl of the currents and knew what she had to do.

As the water ran across her chest and into her open mouth she remembered the cottage a month ago, whitewashed clean and with the daffodils dancing merrily in the window boxes out the front. The tiny pansies swaying in the brisk spring sunlight. She closed her eyes and let the water cover her face completely.

Soon, like the rest of them, there was no trace of her left. The gulls continued to swirl and dip in the empty sky as the mist embraced the beach and peninsula completely.

Fleeting

A fleeting glance
A slender stare
I see your face
Almost everywhere

On strange heads
In places you don't go
That feeling of dread
Daring it to be so

At night in dreams
Across a busy street
I hope and fear

That we shall meet

I tremble as I remember
That sinister smile you wore
The image has never left me
And shall remain for ever more.

The Immortal Benedict Calhoun

He sat and watched the sun set. It was beautiful, he thought, in spite of how apprehensive he felt about what was bound to happen when night fell.

"You chose this," he said quietly to himself. "You want this."

A wolf howled from the valley below and he shivered and pulled his suit jacket tighter around himself. "You chose this," he said again, and he waited.

♦

Bored of living? Afraid to die? Turn your back on both! Choose immortality…

"Ben, why do you read that stuff?" Honey asked, peering over his shoulder.

Ben folded up the newsletter quickly and sipped at his tea. "I wasn't reading anything," he lied. Then, "It's interesting."

"You know it's nonsense, right?" Honey asked, laughing. She had a piece of toast in her hand and as she leaned over him butter dripped from it and landed on his shirt. He pursed his lips, rubbed at the butter with his finger- "Hey!"

She snatched the newsletter out of his hand and stood back with a triumphant grin on her face. "Choose immortality," she read, putting on a ridiculously booming voice. She laughed. "You want to live forever?!"

"No," he said, turning back to his tea. "Of course not."

♦

Ben stood in the queue in the supermarket holding his items (one loaf of bread and a cinnamon whirl in a plastic bag) and heaved a bored sigh. There was a young mother in the queue behind him and she drove her pushchair into the back of his ankles for what felt like the hundredth time. There was an old man in front of him counting out coppers one at a time and handing them over to the till operator.

The child in the pushchair started squalling and Ben furrowed his brow. He wanted to rip the child from its seat and use it to beat the old man with. He grinned to himself.

The old man collected his bags and moved out of the way at last. Ben handed over his items, paid, and then left the store. He sat on a bench out in the carpark and ate his cinnamon whirl, inspecting it closely first in case there was anything wrong with it.

You had to inspect things before you ate them, Ben thought. God knows what was going into your mouth otherwise. He'd heard a story once of somebody who ate a cream bun and ended up dead because of it. Cream bun poisoning.

Ben brushed pastry crumbs from his lap, collected his loaf of bread, and was about to get up when somebody plonked themselves down onto the bench next to him and held out their hand for him to shake.

"Benedict Calhoun? Allow me to introduce myself."

"Okay," Ben said, frowning and shaking the guy's hand. He was going to be sold something, he thought miserably.

"My name's Jim Spiker. Immortal Jim they call me." The guy sounded like an extra out of Oliver. And he smelt like a graveyard.

"Uh huh," Ben said, wiping his hand slowly on his trouser leg. "Excuse me, but where did you get my name from?" He looked at his shirt to make sure he wasn't still wearing his nametag from work.

Jim tapped his head. "From in 'ere," he said, flashing Ben a grin. "I know things. You wanna know how I know things? I'm immortal. You tend to learn a lot when you live forever."

"Immortal," Ben repeated, getting to his feet. "Right. Immortal Jim, yeah makes sense. I uh… I have to go now. My ticket's about to run out."

"Course!" Jim said, jumping to his feet. "Let me just give you this first. I 'eard what you were thinking in there. About the kid in the pushchair? Nice. Just take this and read it." He winked at Ben and then turned on his heels and left.

Ben looked at the newsletter in his hand. He wondered if he'd muttered his thoughts in the store out loud by mistake and somehow managed to attract a weirdo. He sighed and headed for his car.

♦

Honey took forever to get ready. She always did. Ben lay on the bed in his suit looking at his watch and sighing loudly in the hope that she'd get the hint and hurry up.

He pulled his gaze away from his watch and eyed Honey. He didn't even want to go to the party; it was her work do not his.

Ben got up, hooked an arm around Honey's waist and pulled her close to him, hoping that the smile he was giving her was coming across as dashing rather than creepy. "Let's just stay here?" he suggested. "We can… you know…" He nodded towards the bed hopefully.

Honey pushed him away with a laugh. "Yeah right!" she said. "No offence, Ben, but I'd rather go out." She turned back to the mirror and reapplied her lipstick.

Ben had the biggest urge to smash her silly smiling face into that mirror and then throw her down onto the bed anyway.

He sat down. "We're going to be late," he said. Honey didn't seem to care so Ben reached for his newsletter and read it again. *Choose immortality*…

♦

"A werewolf or a vampire?"

"Those are your choices," the man said, shrugging. "Or zombie of course, but you'd have to be a total loser to choose that!"

The man laughed and Ben shivered. He looked at the newsletter that he'd been clutching for the last hour and then back up at the man. "I don't want to die, I want to be immortal. Like Jim," he added.

"You won't be dead exactly," the man said. "You'd be one of the undead. Immortal. You see?"

"I see," Ben said, starting to wish that he'd stayed at the party with Honey. He looked around the room. It was dimly lit with candles, for atmosphere, he supposed, and had various tables around the edge of the room with men and women stood behind them. It looked a bit like a carboot sale in a village hall that had forgotten to pay its electricity bill.

"If you want werewolf, go over there, and if you want vampire, go there," the man said, pointing out two of the tables to Ben. "I chose vampire because it's less painful and way cooler. Werewolf's only part-time of course, so it depends how much you think you'll enjoy being a monster. You turn once a month, kill a few people, then once your full moon's over you're back to being human."

"And I won't ever die?" Ben asked, eyeing up the werewolf table and the couple of people who were there already, signing papers. "I'll live forever?"

"Just don't piss off anyone with a silver bullet," the man said, grinning.

♦

"Benedict Calhoun you are the *slowest* driver ever!" Honey said impatiently. "Put your foot down or we're going to be late!"

Ben checked his mirrors again. He'd seen the adverts; always check your mirrors and then check again. You could crash and die at any moment. "I did say we were going to be late," he said. "If you'd just-"

"I wanted to look nice," Honey said irritably. "It takes time to make yourself look this good, you know! Pull up here."

Ben parked the car, got out and then went round to open up the door for Honey. He looked at the hotel where all of Honey's workmates were meeting for the party. It looked expensive and he hoped that he wouldn't be the one forking out for all the drinks.

He followed Honey inside, forcing a smile onto his face as she ran ahead suddenly, squealing in delight when she spotted her girlfriends in the reception.

♦

"Sign here, here and here," the woman said, tapping the paper and then thrusting it towards him.

Ben took a pen from the table and signed where he had been told. "Are you a werewolf?" he asked, trying to make polite conversation.

"Of course not," she said. "There's a full moon due, do I look like a werewolf? I'm just here to sign you in." She took the paper back from him and eyed his signature.

"Go through that door," she said, pointing behind her. "And wait at the top of the hill."

"Easy as that," Ben said, "Right!" He grinned at the woman and she blinked and then looked away. Ben sighed and headed for the door.

♦

"Ben, where are you going?!" Honey asked, chasing after him. She grabbed his arm and made him stop.

Ben looked at Honey and then back at her workmates in the hall. The music was so loud it made his head hurt and he couldn't stand the sound of drunken laughter. He imagined some idiot pouring beer into the speakers and the whole sound system blowing up and killing them all.

"I'm just nipping out for some air," he said. "You stay and enjoy yourself, I won't be too long." Hopefully the place would blow up and kill them all while he was safely out of the way. He offered Honey a weak smile.

"Okay," she said. "Don't go far, alright?" She kissed him on the cheek and then turned back to the party.

Ben put his hand into his trouser pocket and felt for his crumpled newsletter. "I won't," he said quietly, and then he left the building.

Ben walked down the street, reading the newsletter again. "Why am I even considering this?" he muttered to himself. He wondered if he was going crazy. Or maybe he was ill. "Doctors, first thing tomorrow," he told himself.

He stopped walking when he reached the address that was on the newsletter, though nowhere did it mention anything at all about the building being creepy looking.

Ben realised that it was more than likely that Immortal Jim was a psychopath, sending out newsletters to lure his unsuspecting victims to their death. He dithered outside the building, waiting until someone else entered before he followed them inside.

♦

Ben shifted a little on the grass. The wolf howled again from the valley below and he got to his feet, wondering if it really was too late to change his mind. The sun had set completely now and a silver moon hung in its place, hidden slightly behind a thin veil of clouds.

He had mud on his smart trousers. That was annoying. Ben brushed at his backside and wondered if Honey was missing him. Probably not, he thought. She was probably drunk and had her tongue down some other guy's throat. Well he'd soon stop that; he'd rip out the guy's throat. And Honey's. And everyone else's at that stupid party.

Ben grinned and as the wolf appeared at the crest of the hill, he turned to embrace it.

When the animal snarled and pulled itself up to its full height, standing on its hind legs, Ben screamed. And he ran.

Cloak

I saw you again the other night
Shrouded in that sickly bar-room light
Smoking and watching the maudlin band
That cigarette held like a gun in your hand

When I came in the room you didn't look around
The clatter of glasses, a crystalline sound,
Merged in with the jazz from the sticky floored stage
Your ratty cord overcoat feathered with age

Reached out to me now across the jazz and the gloom
Your haze briefly bloomed as it circled the room

I couldn't see your face as I walked into your smoke

It buried your features like a steel-grey cloak.

Whistling in the Theatre

Renée read over the audition section of the script again, glancing around as a draught from somewhere seemed to rustle through the auditorium, whistling through cracks in the walls, she supposed. The fact it sounded like whistling at all was enough to unnerve her.

"Nasty day out," said a man beside her, grabbing one of the pages for her as a stronger gust caught them.

Renée nodded.

The man grinned and extended his hand. "Jimmy," he said.

Renée took his hand and shook it politely, suppressing a shiver. His hand was icy cold. "Renée," she said.

"So what part are you reading for then?" Jimmy asked, folding over his own script. "Female lead or female shadow?"

"Shadow," Renée replied, smiling more warmly now. "It's a great part. What about you?"

"I'm going to chance both," Jimmy said with a grin. "Both the male parts anyway, that is, I don't think my skills are good enough to pass me off as a woman, even one that's a shadow!"

Renée smiled politely. Jimmy grinned, and after a moment Renée turned back to her script.

"You heard the stories about this place? That it's haunted?" Jimmy asked after a minute, breaking Renée's concentration.

She shook her head. "I don't believe in ghosts," she said confidently, though she did glance around. The shadows around the sides of the stage did look especially dark, even with the house lights up and plenty of people around.

"Yeah, probably just urban legend," Jimmy grinned.

"Renée Burns?" a small, wiry woman carrying a clipboard called from the wings.

"That's me," Renée said gratefully, getting to her feet. She felt a cold touch on her arm as she gathered her stuff.

"Break a leg, and hopefully I'll see you again soon," Jimmy said, giving her a warm smile.

"Thanks. You too," Renée replied, then hurried up the narrow, creaky steps at the side of the stage to go after the woman, feeling slightly annoyed at Jimmy for distracting her.

♦

Renée walked slowly into the theatre, wondering if she'd mistaken the time. The corridor was silent and there didn't seem to be any heating on. She swung the heavy door into the auditorium open however, and saw a few people sitting at the front, some with their legs hanging over the stage, reading scripts. She let the door swing closed again behind her, but just as she let it go she heard a shrill whistle coming from somewhere near the stage, and jumped.

"Renée!" The wiry woman from the auditions appeared in front of her. "Are you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost!" she exclaimed.

Renée shuddered. "I... I just thought I heard a whistle," she said softly. Everyone looked up.

"Probably just the wind, it's an old building," the woman said, half reassuringly, half dismissive. "Everyone knows not to whistle in a theatre. I'm Lorraine," she added. "Grab a coffee, the director's running late, but we'll be doing the first read through in an hour or so."

Renée nodded, taking a deep breath, and walked to where a rickety table had been set up with a pot of coffee on it and a load of mugs. She poured some, looked around for milk, but couldn't find any and decided to drink it black.

"Hiya!" exclaimed a familiar voice behind her, making her jump. "Renée, isn't it?"

Renée turned and nodded.

"I'm Jimmy, remember, from the audition?" Jimmy asked, grinning broadly.

"Of course," Renée said politely.

"I got the Shadow part," Jimmy continued. He took Renée's arm and she shivered a bit. "This here is Martin, and Chloé," he said, leading her over to the others.

"Hi, I'm Renée," Renée introduced herself, sitting down near Chloé, who gave her a smile.

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Jimmy spoke up again. "So, what do you all think of the play?" he asked.

"This writer is the new Beckett," Martin replied knowledgeably. "I love the minimalism."

"What about you, Jimmy?" Chloé asked. "What do you think?"

"I don't have a bloody clue," Jimmy answered honestly, with a grin. "A play about talking shadows that take over people's lives? Weird," he said, shaking his head. "But it pays the rent."

"Won't you find it hard to inhabit the character, if you can't identify with him?" Renée asked.

"You follow the Stanislavski method?" Martin asked Renée.

She nodded. "I'm hardly an aficionado, but I find it helps, trying to fully embody the role, become it, let it become me," she told him.

"Stanis-what?" Jimmy asked, glancing from Renée to Martin with a puzzled look on his face.

"You haven't studied theatre?" Chloé asked, turning to him.

Jimmy grinned and shook his head. "Nope. Used to do local amateur theatre, was told I was good at it so ended up doing a few proper parts that I got paid for, then when I lost me job I found out I'd been doing it long enough to get the equity card, so I went for it," he told the others. "Better than real work, as they say!" he chuckled.

Renée smiled politely, and turned back to Martin. "Where did you study?" she asked him.

"Trinity," he told her. "Graduated three years ago. What about you?"

"The Gaiety," Renée replied with a smile. She looked up when she heard another shrill whistle come from the wings. "None of you heard that?" she asked the others, confused.

"Heard what?" Chloé asked. The men's faces were blank; Jimmy even looked slightly concerned.

"Must be imagining things," Renée said, forcing a smile; not wanting anyone to think she was crazy.

"You know there's a rumour this place is haunted?" Jimmy said.

Renée sighed, but Martin nodded enthusiastically. "I heard that's why the writer wanted it performed here first," he told the rest of them with a knowledgeable look. "The stories say there are things in the shadows, which steal people away; an ironic juxtaposition with the theme of the play," he continued.

"You don't believe it though, surely?" Chloé asked, Renée glanced at her and saw that she was looking around nervously. There were an awful lot of shadows, and the building was several hundred years old.

Martin shook his head. "I've read a few books on the subject, it has intrigued several historians from here and abroad," he said. "The most common theory is that there was a Jack-the-Ripper style character operating in the era when most of the young women went missing."

"How many?" Chloé asked hesitantly, like she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

"Eight over a twenty year period," Martin said.

"Ah but there were others too," Jimmy interjected.

"Yes, that's true," Martin nodded. "The eight are just the ones the historians attribute to being down to a killer operating here."

"How many went missing overall?" Chloé asked, just as Renée spoke up again, to ask the same question.

"I think the final figure stands at twenty," Martin informed them. "The last to disappear was about eighty years ago though," he added.

"It's always women too, isn't it?" Jimmy asked.

Martin nodded. "Always women, always in a prominent, but supporting, role. Never understudies or leading ladies. Never men in the roles of female characters, when that was the norm."

Jimmy looked at Renée, his eyes twinkling. "Bet you're wishing you'd auditioned for Chloé's part now, eh?" he said.

Renée frowned. "I like the character of the shadow," she said. "And I'm sure it's all nonsense anyway. There must be some other explanation," she added tensely.

"Most likely the girls were brought home by their families, or fell pregnant, or something rather more mundane like that," Martin suggested. "It's a long time ago, tales grow as the years go by."

"Exactly," Renée said, glaring at Jimmy, who held up his hands and winked at her.

"I'm just chatting," he protested. "Never mind me, I just like to have a laugh."

"I should probably get back to reading through the script," Renée said coldly.

"That's me told!" Jimmy exclaimed, grinning. "I'm going for a smoke before the director gets here," he added, getting to his feet.

"I'll join you," Chloé said. "After all the talk of ghosts, I need some fresh air."

"Hardly fresh, if you're smoking," Martin commented.

"The breaths in between are, and that'll do me," Jimmy grinned, linking arms with Chloé as they headed for the exit.

"Not a smoker then?" Martin asked Renée.

She shook her head, declining to mention that she had smoked until a year ago, and was about to make a disparaging comment when she heard whistles again, softer this time. She looked at Martin.

"More whistling noises?" he asked.

Renée nodded. "You really didn't hear anything?" she asked.

Martin shook his head. "Maybe I just wasn't giving it any attention. It probably is only the wind, after all," he told Renée.

"Yeah," Renée said, rubbing her eyes. "Must be."

♦

"Dress rehearsal, five PM tomorrow," the director said. "I've got to go talk to the media for a bit. Don't forget to lock the back door, whoever is last out."

Renée sat on the floor of the stage, rubbing her temples. She kept hearing whistles, and they were making her miss her cues. Her head was pounding.

"You ok?" Jimmy asked, touching her arm. She flinched.

"You're always cold," Renée snapped.

"Cold hands, warm heart," Jimmy grinned. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"I need to practise more," Renée replied. "Any of you up for one more run through?"

"I could do with the practise," Chloé said.

"One run through, then we'll head to the pub?" Jimmy asked.

"You can get the first round!" Martin said.

"Right, let's get on with it then!" Jimmy said, standing in the wings. Renée stood on the opposite side, waiting for Chloé and Martin to go through the first scene. She watched silently, feeling shivery, briefly wondering if she was coming down with something. She tried to remember her lines, but all she could think of as Chloé and Martin began the opening scene was the whistling, and the shadows that seemed sinister tonight. More so than usual. The room felt cold, so cold, and she shivered.

♦

"Renée!" Martin snapped. "That's your cue!"

"Sorry," Renée said, stepping forward. "I was lost in thought for a minute."

"Renée?" Martin said again, looking around. "Jimmy? Where did Renée go?" he asked.

Jimmy shrugged and looked around. "She was here a minute ago, maybe she went to get some air?" he suggested.

"I'm here," Renée said, stepping farther forward to where the lights were. Something halted her. A force, an invisible barrier. "Hey! What the hell?" she exclaimed.

"I'll go look for her," Jimmy said. He walked past her. Renée reached out to touch him. His arm felt warm this time. He brushed his hand, scratching it, like all he'd felt was a minor itch. Renée reached out to him again, but where the lights were directly above, she couldn't go.

"No," she hissed. "No. Help! What the hell is going on? If this is a joke it's not funny!" she yelled. No one acknowledged her, Chloé and Martin were calling her name, Jimmy was out of sight.

"Hey! You're not funny!" she shouted. "Listen to me!" Chloé and Martin moved farther away.

"I'm dreaming," Renée told herself. "Must have fallen asleep. Anxiety dream. Lucid anxiety dream," she muttered. "Wake up, Renée."

Nothing happened.

♦

"What do you mean?" Renée watched as Lorraine's lips pursed. "Where has she gone?"

Jimmy, Martin and Chloé all looked helplessly at her. "No one knows. Her flatmates, her parents... no one's heard from her," Chloé said, glancing nervously around at the shadows. "We were all here, then suddenly... she wasn't."

"I'm here!" Renée yelled at him, though she knew her voice just sounded like a whisper of wind to them. She'd been shouting for hours. They hadn't heard a thing.

"The dress rehearsal is this evening!" Lorraine shrieked. "I can't find a new actress ready to play female shadow in time!"

No one said anything.

"Help!" Renée shrieked, from the darkest corner of the stage. There she felt strongest.

Chloé looked around. "Did you guys hear that? Sounded like a whistle?" she asked.

Lorraine and the two men shook their heads.

"Don't you start," Martin sighed. "Renée said she heard whistling, maybe she was afraid," he told Lorraine.

"Stupid, superstitious actors," Lorraine fumed. "I'll have to try to recast it. If any of you hear from her, let me know immediately!" she said, dialling a number on her phone. "It's me," she said. "We're going to have to cast the Female Shadow part again. I'll explain later." She snapped the phone shut. "I mean it, if you hear anything, call me at once!" she said, snapping the phone open again and dialling another number as she walked away.

"I hear you," Renée said sadly, from the shadows in the wings. She knew she wouldn't be heard in return. Jimmy sat with his head in his hands; Martin looked a little shaken as well. Chloé kept glancing around nervously, but they all sat under the lights. Renée couldn't get close to them.

Renée knew now, what had happened to those girls. She could see them, pale faced with rouge on their cheeks. Old fashioned dresses. To the rest of the world they were just shadows, but she could see them. Screeching in the vain hope their voices would be heard as anything other than a stray gust of wind, or even a ghostly whistle. Not dead, not alive. Not ghosts, just shadows. And she was one of them.

Picture the Scene

Cut-glass candlesticks bounce rainbows
into the room which sit on the
walls and ceilings like pretty little pictures.
China dolls with white faces and red
lips smile down from the bookcase
they share with the novels and porcelain dogs.

Perfectly painted pictures of daisies
and other flowers hang spirit-level straight
above the fireplace where the Buddhas sit.
There is no TV.
There is a record player and
a chess set carved from stone.

Blood is splattered across the sofa
like paint flicked from an artist's brush,
a knife lies on the carpet in sunlight
before the curtains are drawn and
the room darkens. Her body lies prone
before she is bagged and taken away.

Remembering

It was stupid. I suppose we'd all say that now, only I'm the only one who has lived long enough to think back on what we did, so I guess I'm the only one with the benefit of hindsight.

The wine spilt on the rug again and I rubbed it in hastily as Judy yelled that it would ruin the carpet. We dabbed at it, laughing like children. The holidays always made us act like that. Here we were, all approaching 30, a few of us thinking about kids and detached houses and yet, when we were together we were 18 again. Just stupid, drunken students. We forgot the mortgages and the council tax and the fact that some of us were getting fat, and we laughed for a week, together. Like we used to.

It was called Famous Haunts. The DVD cover promised to take us to dimensions beyond our own and to show us that life is only the veil to something altogether more mystical. Everything else waits on the side we can't see. We laughed, of course. We mocked the psychic and the velvet suit he was

wearing. We shrieked with laughter at the female presenter who cowered behind the men as they crept around some old stately home.

We mocked, safe in the knowledge that our reality of tartan blankets, the savings accounts and the moderately expensive Scotch was a world away from what was happening on the DVD. After all, we were estate agents, accountants, primary school teachers. And what could be safer than that?

I think we laughed the hardest when Simon suggested the Ouija board. It was late by then and the sun was just coming over the lake beyond the house we'd rented for the week. We were full of Scotch and we laughed when he said he'd drive into town the next day and buy us a kit, then we'd see how brave we were.

I laughed as I went up the stairs to bed, safe in the knowledge that it was all rubbish. We were going to get drunk again; all put our fingers on the glass and shout questions into the air. I was looking forward to it.

Was I scared that night? No, I don't think I was. The cottage was just as cosy; we were drinking expensive wine and letting the dishes from dinner get burnt clean by the dishwasher. I had a blanket around my shoulders, and I had Katie beside me. She told me she wasn't scared either, but I noticed she'd put her crucifix around her neck. I laughed at her for it. She was a senior marketing executive for a High Street clothing chain. The forces of the dead meant nothing to her other than all the movies we'd watched back at university. I remember she laughed nervously and drank a lot of wine when Simon brought out the box.

I took a handful of crisps from the bowl as Simon read the back of the box in a Bella Lugosi voice. A long ramble about the mirrored veil and how we would be casting the veil aside like dust to the air. Not everybody stayed at the table all the time; we wandered around, getting more crisps, pouring wine. At first Simon's theatrics were fun, but we bored easily.

It's strange. I just remember what happened in flashes. Tableaux that I can't quite fit together into a full picture no matter how much I pore over them. I remember looking at the board through my wine glass, my attention only half on the table. I was looking at Katie too. I

was looking at the profile of her face, the delicate slope down to her shoulder blades. The light of the fire was glancing off her cheeks and she looked beautiful.

When the glass smashed some of us laughed. Not all of us, but a few who thought that Simon had somehow orchestrated it to scare us. After all, we were in an old cottage by a lake, miles from town. It was perfect.

I didn't laugh, but only because Katie didn't. She had a hand clutched over her mouth and looked horrified. I remember the small noise she let out as she scrambled away from the table and ran from the room. Someone went after her, I think it was Sarah.

Picking glass out of my finger and calling Simon an idiot. He didn't reply. He was dragging the joke out as long as he could, pretending to be scared.

The evening was ruined. None of us wanted to talk. Someone ran the Hoover across the rug to pick up the last pieces of glass and we poured a lot of wine to fill the silences. One by one we went to bed, mumbling excuses about it having been a long day.

I was one of the last. I gathered up the last few glasses on the table. I felt tired and full of wine as I dumped the glasses in the sink. The house was quiet and I tried to stop the glasses clinking together in case anyone could hear. It was unlikely, the house was huge and the bedrooms were a long way apart. I could hear the wind outside and the cliché of it all made me chuckle.

I poured myself a large glass of water and called out to the last couple of people in the living room that I was going to bed. Nobody answered. I crept through the house quietly, wondering if anyone was sitting awake worrying about the Ouija board and the smashed glass. Then I remembered Katie and how terrified she had looked.

I paused outside her door, wondering if I could go to her or whether she'd just see it as a cheap come-on. We'd flirted and people had joked about us getting close, but neither of us had admitted anything to the other. I had my reasons, mainly that I secretly thought she was too good for me. She was graceful and quick witted, and I felt like a boorish, brash idiot when I was around her. But I often caught her looking at me when we were in a group, and

she was always the one by my side on the holidays the group took. Maybe I had a chance, even a small one…

The light was on so I tapped at the door and waited, vaguely aware that I was actually nervous about seeing her and maybe admitting how I felt. There was no answer so I tapped again and called her name. My hands were sweating and I rubbed them briefly on my shirt.

The door swung open slowly when I tapped the third time. And that's all I remember.

She was in my arms and the sun was beginning to rise. There was blood everywhere.

I looked up. The blood was drying and Katie's eyes were lifeless. The water glass was in pieces, but the largest piece was embedded in her throat. The house was silent.

I think I screamed for the others to come. I screamed for a long time and it never occurred to me to wonder why nobody came.

I stroked her face and whispered her name when I couldn't scream any more. Then I realised something else, and immediately wondered why I hadn't thought it earlier. She had been murdered, and whatever had killed her could still be in the house, waiting.

I put her down and leapt to my feet. I yelled into the silence for someone to help me. I was panicked, desperate to find someone but nobody answered my calls.

I can see the blood on the floor now, but I don't think I saw it then. I was too blinded by panic that I just ran.

There was nobody in the third bedroom, or the fourth. In my panic I couldn't remember names, or who should have been in which room. I yelled incoherently until I was too exhausted to keep running and shouting at the same time.

I collapsed in the hallway, slid down the wall onto the floor and sobbed. A sudden, strange thought entered my head. How would I explain this to my

office? I had commitments next week; they were expecting me back for meetings. I stared blankly at the neutral walls and tried to reconcile the two realities. They wouldn't fit together. All I kept coming back to was Katie's staring eyes.

I don't know how long I stared, half thinking about Katie, half about my desk and my calendar. It felt like forever.

The phone. It occurred to me suddenly and cut through the daze. I scrambled to my feet and raced through the house, tripping over my own feet in my hurry to get to the living room. I might have been screaming again but it made no difference to the empty house. I knocked over chairs and sent coat-stands sprawling as I ran up the hallway to the living room.

I remember slamming into the closed door. It had been locked and the key was nowhere to be seen. In my panic I remember wondering why on earth anyone would have locked the door to the only telephone.

I took a run up at the door after I'd pounded it without it moving an inch. When my shoulder connected with the wood I heard a crack, the lock was coming away from the wall. I immediately slammed at it again, ignoring the pain resonating across my shoulder. The door collapsed and I landed heavily in the living room.

And I screamed.

They had been arranged around the table, with the Ouija board as a centrepiece. Some of them stared at me; some of them didn't have eyes any more. All of them, every other person in the house was at the table, and all of them had glass protruding from their throats. There was a glass on the table and it moved on its own, whipping from letter to letter and leaving a red trail as it moved violently back and forth across the table. There was still blood dripping onto the rug.

That'll do more damage than the wine I spilt, I thought. Then I screamed, raking at my face with my fingernails as I backed out of the room in a frenzy of terror.

The fallen coat stand tripped me and I fell sprawling onto the hallway floor. And that's when I saw the blood. There was a wide trail as far as I could see, from the stairs and into the living room. As if someone had dragged... I stopped myself before I could complete the picture.

I stared at the blood for a long while. It might have taken me an hour to work up the courage to touch it, and that's when I noticed the glass in my hands.

Tiny shards, only painful now that I knew they were there. As if I'd forced my hand into glass... Or as if I'd forced glass into something else and it had broken. As soon as I thought that, I knew.

So here I am now, out on the lake in a small boat. I weighed anchor almost two days ago and the more I stare back at the house, the more I remember. Talking to Katie, then feeling *different*. She made me leave, told me I was scaring her.

I went, feeling feverish and confused. There was a pressure in my head, as if something was waiting be released. Then it happened.

My hands tingled, then my whole body... then I couldn't move any more. But he could, the one we released from the Ouija board. He pushed me back into the darkest recesses of my brain whilst he went from room to room, chuckling using my voice and doing unspeakable things using my hands.

I watched him helplessly. I couldn't use my mouth, he had control of it, but I could watch every detail of what he was doing through my own eyes. I screamed silently and raged inside my head as he laughed and splashed blood across room after room.

Katie was last. I still don't know how he persuaded her to let him into her room, that part hasn't come back to me yet, but I tried using every ounce of my strength to take my body back once I knew where he was going. I screamed and bellowed and raged as he knocked gently on her door and began to plead with her to let him in.

And now I can feel my head starting to ache again. The lake is tranquil and I didn't dare bring anything out here with me that *he* could use if he came back.

No knives, nothing I could use to kill myself, and nothing he could use when he comes back and takes control.

I keep standing up and looking at the water. It's deep and I know it's icy cold. I could turn the boat over, throw myself into the water and I would be dead within an hour. But I can't. And it's not because I'm a coward.

I just can't stop listening to the voice. The small voice in my head that tells me not to end it now, that we have work to do.

The lake looks like glass. I sit down and stare at it, promising myself that I will end it... I will. But I don't move.

Whispers

Whispers.
I glance around,
there's no one there.

Shivers.
Nowhere is cold,
I wonder.

Ideas.
Start to creep in
to my mind.

Paranoia.

Fear confuses me,

I hear –

Whispers.

Eyes

She flicked on the light switch and padded into the kitchen. She stood on her tiptoes as the tiled floor was cold and she couldn't bear placing her whole foot down. She poured a saucer of milk for her cat, though she didn't know where the animal was. Hunting, she thought vaguely.

She turned to make her way back out of the kitchen, as she stepped she felt something wet squelch beneath her toes. She slipped and landed flat on her back with a thud and a gasp. With a groan she sat up. Two cat's eyes were on her kitchen floor, a wet slide mark beneath them from her slip...

She woke up with her heart pounding and breathed an instant sigh of relief. "Just a dream," she whispered.

"Elle? Did you say something?"

"No, Alec, you're hearing things again." Elle rolled over in bed and looked at him. He looked different with his hair shaved, she mused, she wasn't sure if she

liked it or not. He gave her a sleepy smile, and she reached out and touched his face gently. His eyes were so dark they were almost black. "I'm getting up," she said.

Alec murmured a reply and rolled over in bed. Elle got up, put her dressing gown on and went to make tea. She stood in the kitchen and gazed out of the window as she waited for the kettle to boil. Their new home stood beside the lake and she could see almost right the way across it from her kitchen window. There were mountains in the distance beyond the lake; she could make out the shape of them through the thin veil of mist that hung in the air today.

The kettle boiled. Elle yawned widely, covering her mouth with the back of her hand, and poured water into two mugs. She felt something brush against the back of her legs and looked down to smile at the cat. "You would freak out if I told you the dream I had last night," she told the cat.

She squeezed out the teabags, poured a little milk into the mugs and then some into a saucer which she left out for the cat. Alec didn't like the animal on the worktops; Elle didn't really see the problem. She left the kitchen and went back to the bedroom with the tea.

Alec was sitting up in bed, scratching his head sleepily. He turned to look at her as she entered the room... *His eyes were gone; two empty red sockets remained...*

Elle gasped and stepped back, the tea sloshed over the side of the mugs and onto the carpet, she felt hot liquid scald her hands.

"Careful!" Alec exclaimed, jumping out of bed and taking the mugs from her. Elle blinked.

"Your eyes..." she whispered. She frowned in puzzlement and peered at his face. Then she laughed a little and said, "I think I'm still half asleep... I had the strangest dream last night and then when you looked at me just then... God!"

Alec put the mugs on the bedside table and then knelt to dab at the tea on the carpet with a tissue. He looked up at Elle. "What's wrong with my eyes?" he asked.

"Nothing," Elle said, bending to help him. "Nothing at all."

♦

When Alec left to go to work, Elle went to sit outside on the porch with her sketchpad and pencils. She looked at the lake and then her blank paper, wondering where she should start. There was a radio sat next to her and she leaned over to switch it on.

She started to draw, outlining the lake and the mountains and the trees at the edges of the lake. She was engrossed in her art, sketching the scenery, adding lines, removing them, her pencil darting across the paper. Her eyes flicked up occasionally to take everything in.

The radio stopped playing suddenly. Then it started again. Elle looked towards it briefly and then tapped her pencil against the pad as she took in the view. The cat came and mewed at her.

"What's up?" Elle asked, smiling at the animal. The cat mewed again and Elle reached out to touch it. The cat hissed, its hackles went up, and it took a few steps back before turning and fleeing from the porch. Elle frowned.

The radio crackled, stopped working briefly, and then found its signal and started up again. Only the station had changed. Elle put her sketchpad down and fiddled with the dial on the radio, trying to get it back to what she was listening to.

Officer... a week, dead a week! Mr... found the body... Something in the...

"Damn thing," Elle muttered, twisting the dial.

Eyes...No witnesses... Officer said that... eyes left... and he saw it come from...

A splash from the lake made Elle look up sharply. Fish jumped out of the water sometimes, she knew that, they caught flies. Somebody told her that once. "Hello?" she called, and then felt instantly self conscious. Was she expecting the fish to reply?!

The lake was still. Elle felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise and she shivered. She stared at the lake. Suddenly the radio came back to life, playing

some old track from the 20s that Elle didn't recognise, she gasped, cursed quietly, then scrabbled to turn the radio off. Her heart pounded.

When Elle turned back to the lake she saw the monster. Only its head was out of the water, the rest of the creature lurked beneath the lake's surface. Its skin was grey and flaccid, it had two large eyeless sockets on the front of its face and its teeth, when the creature pulled back its lips at her, were pointed, like a piranha's.

Elle wanted to scream but she couldn't. She drew in a ragged breath and stared. The creature saw her, she knew that. It had no eyes, but it knew she was there. An image flashed into her mind, an image of the creature pulling a corpse into the lake, pulling it down to the depths and devouring it, eating every part of it but the eyes...

She moved then, turning desperately on the porch, running into the house and locking and barring the door behind her, dragging a chair to push up under the door handle. She went to the window to peer out at the lake, to make sure the thing hadn't followed her.

The lake was still and calm. The monster... whatever it was, was gone.

Elle stood for a moment, her breath coming in short fearful gasps as she stared at the lake. She felt tears rolling down her cheeks and she wiped them away distractedly. She didn't want to leave the house in case it was there waiting for her, waiting to devour her, it had shown her what it would do to her, what it had done to others...

She sobbed and then covered her mouth quickly. She tore her gaze away from the window and looked for her phone. It was on the kitchen table where she'd left it; she grabbed it and punched in Alec's number.

"Alec! It's me, answer your damn phone! Come home as soon as you get this message, there's something here, something in the lake... I heard something on the radio, saw this thing... Just come home!"

Elle clasped her phone tightly and pulled opened a drawer. She took out the biggest kitchen knife she came across and held it. She stood for a moment wondering what to do, then she pushed the knife through her belt, pocketed her phone and ran to the front door.

A shape moved behind the frosted glass of the door and Elle brandished the knife. "Try it," she growled.

There was a pause, a muffled curse and a jangle of keys, and then Alec opened the door. "Jesus!" he exclaimed, taking a step back and almost falling down off the doorsteps. He righted himself quickly and stared at Elle, his dark eyes wide.

"You got my message?!" she asked. "We've got to get out of here."

"Elle, woah, calm down, what message?" Alec asked, coming inside. He closed the front door and then took his shoes off, regarding Elle warily.

"I rang you!" Elle cried, watching him, wondering how he could be so calm. Then, "What are you doing home?!"

"Got off early," Alec said, shrugging his shoulders. He went into the living room and sat down on the sofa with a sigh. Then he sat forwards and took his own phone from his back pocket. "Oh yeah, a message," he said. "What was it?" He looked at Elle expectantly.

She was still brandishing the knife, she realised, and she shoved it back through her belt impatiently. "There is a monster," she said slowly, "In the lake. Listen to me! I know it sounds crazy, ok? But I saw it... it didn't have any eyes, Alec!"

"Not eyes again," Alec said, leaning forwards to take the TV remote from the coffee table.

Elle snatched it out of his hand and tossed it into the armchair. "I saw it!" she said, angry that he dismissed what she said so easily. "I *saw* it!"

Alec sighed, scratched his head. He shrugged. "Ok," he said. "You saw it. A monster in the lake. And what is the monster doing in the lake?"

"Don't," Elle growled at him. "Don't humour me!" She shook her head at him and left the room.

♦

That night Elle sat by the window, peering out at the lake while she toyed with the kitchen knife. Alec lay in bed watching her. "I hope you are coming to bed tonight?" he asked.

"How can I sleep?" she asked. "That *thing* is out there!" She heard Alec sigh but she didn't turn to look at him. "It could get in," she continued. "I heard something on the radio about a body..."

"We moved here so that you'd get over all this," Alec said quietly. "It's peaceful here. No stress." He was quiet for a little while and she said nothing. "I'm going to sleep," Alec said, and he turned away from her and turned his bedside light off.

Elle stayed by the window. When they had first moved to the house, Elle thought the lake looked most beautiful at night when the moonlight reflected silver on its surface. Now she thought it looked dark and sinister. Now she knew what lurked beneath its surface.

She got up from the window seat and went to the bed. Alec was snoring softly so she leaned over and kissed him gently. "I'm going out," she told him quietly.

She headed downstairs in the near darkness and then flicked on the light as she entered the kitchen. The cat was standing on the draining board, licking moisture from the bottom of the sink. It looked up and mewed at her. The tip of its tail flicked and then it jumped down off the side and ran past her.

Elle moved quickly and snatched the cat up into her arms; she cradled it as she went to the back door. With a deep breath to calm her nerves, and a kiss to the top of the cat's head, Elle stepped out onto the porch. The security light came on and lit up the area, the lake beyond the light's reach was still and dark, but she could see ripples on the surface closest to the house.

"Tell me if it's close, ok?" she whispered to the cat.

Elle moved down to the edge of the lake, peering suspiciously into the dark as she walked. The cat was purring steadily in her arms and sent vibrations through her chest. It calmed her and she ventured farther from the house.

From the lakeside... No body found at all... Officers have confirmed that... only the eyes...

Elle gasped and looked back towards the house. The radio was crackling and sending out white noise and snatches of some news channel. The security light was still on and the porch was empty.

The cat squirmed suddenly in her arms and Elle tightened her grip and turned back to the lake. She could see nothing, hear nothing but the sound of the radio... The cat hissed and leapt from her grasp before racing into the trees nearby.

Eats all of its victims but the eyes... Nobody who has seen it...

Elle felt her heart racing. She looked desperately from the trees, to the lake, back to the house again. She felt for the knife and drew it from her belt, watching, waiting... She didn't know what made her look down.

A single eyeball rested in the mud by her feet, its blue iris looking sightlessly to the night sky, as she stared at it another was gently pushed to shore by the water, offered up to her from the lake.

Elle let out a strangled sob, raised a trembling hand to her lips, and stared at the eyes. They stared back at her.

With a click, the security light went out and Elle froze in terror, cloaked in darkness. She blinked and when her eyes adjusted to the moonlight she saw it.

The monster was pulling a body from the lake, dragging it like a lion would drag a deer, its needle teeth sank into the... Elle couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman... its teeth were buried in the victim's neck as it pulled it out of the water. Elle watched as it stopped and then tore chunks of flesh from the corpse, gulping them back in great mouthfuls. She watched in morbid fascination, hardly daring to breathe.

Please, she thought, *please don't notice me...*

"Elle? What are you doing out here?!"

For a moment the monster carried on feeding. It didn't seem to notice the security light had come on. Elle tore her gaze away from the creature and looked back to Alec on the porch.

"Run!" she cried, or tried to. Her voice came out in a breathy whisper. Then she sucked in a lungful of air. "*Run!*" she screamed.

Alec cursed loudly and bolted back into the house. Elle ran, not daring to look back. She cried out as Alec grabbed her arm and pulled her into the house, slamming the door closed as soon as she was inside and locking it.

"You saw?!" she asked. "You saw it! I told you!"

"What the hell were you doing out there?!" Alec asked, pulling the kitchen blinds and then dragging Elle from the kitchen. "What the hell was that thing?!"

"I don't know! We need to call the cops or something," Elle said urgently. "We need to kill it!"

"*We* don't need to do anything," Alec said, heading upstairs. Elle ran after him and stood in the doorway as he pulled a suitcase from the wardrobe and started throwing clothes into it.

"It's killing people!" Elle cried. "Killing them and eating them... in our lake!"

"It's not our lake, Elle," Alec said, "Not our problem. We just need to get the hell away."

"We can't leave that *thing*," Elle growled, going to the suitcase and unpacking all the things Alec had just packed. "I am *not* running away again!" Her voice broke on the last word and she covered her face with her hands and fought back tears.

Alec went to her and put his arms around her, holding her close. She cried as he ran his fingers through her hair. "We have to stop it," she sobbed.

"It's probably gonna eat us," Alec said resignedly.

Elle looked up at him triumphantly. "But we can stay?!" she asked. She hugged Alec tighter. "We have to kill it," she said. "Stop it from hurting anybody else, stop it from..."

Elle ran from the bedroom into the ensuite. She just managed to get the toilet seat up in time before she was violently sick. The memory of two blue eyes staring up at her from the mud turned her stomach and she retched again.

Alec came to her and rubbed her back. She heard him heave a sigh. "I just... I don't want anybody else to get hurt," she explained. She wiped her mouth, flushed the toilet, and then got to her feet and went to the sink, cupping some water in her hands and taking a drink.

"Alright?" Alec asked.

Elle nodded. "Yeah," she said. "This creature, it kills people, eats them... but it doesn't eat their eyes..." She shook her head. "Somebody must know about this thing. We need to find somebody who knows about it, they might know where to find it..."

"It's in the lake," Alec said. "We just need to kill it."

Elle ran a hand through her hair and then felt for the knife in her belt. She looked at Alec. "We should get back out there," she said. "It would've gone back to the body, we could kill it while it's... feeding."

"I still think we should leave," Alec muttered.

Elle moved past him back into the bedroom, pulling the knife from her belt as she went. She went back down the stairs and then determinedly into the kitchen. She opened up the back door, the security light came on and Elle gasped.

The monster was standing on the porch, dripping wet. In the light it looked almost human, for a split second she wondered if it had been once... It was naked, and with the light shining she saw that its skin wasn't grey, but silver and scaled, like that of a fish. Its eyeless sockets stared at her.

"Jesus, Elle, shut the door!" Alec yelled.

Elle slammed the door in the monster's face just as Alec grabbed her by the arm and pulled her backwards. She turned to him urgently and then jumped as the creature threw itself at the back door.

"We need to get out of here!" Alec cried, "Out the front door, away from the damn lake!"

Elle hesitated as Alec tugged at her arm. The creature let out a forlorn wail and then hurled itself at the door again. Elle turned and ran with Alec, running for the front door. They pulled it open together and ran out into the night.

♦

Elle stared out of the passenger window, watching the darkened countryside pass by. She pulled her gaze away and looked over at Alec. His knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel and he had a frown on his face. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"I don't know," Alec said shortly. "Away."

"Are we ever going back?" Elle asked quietly. "We can't..."

"We're not running away," Alec said, glancing at her briefly before turning his attention back to the road. "We're just..."

Elle waited for a moment and then realised he wasn't going to finish his sentence. She turned her head and stared out of the window again. "What if it finds us?" she asked. "Did you hear that noise it made?! It was... bereft." She shook her head. "We have to go back for the cat."

"No we don't," Alec said, and then he raised a hand to cut off her protests as soon as she opened her mouth.

Elle looked out of the window. They had turned off the main road now and were driving down a lane lined with tall dark trees. It was getting lighter now and the digital clock on the dashboard said that it was 5am. "Where are we going?" she asked again.

"I saw a sign at the top of the lane," Alec said. "There's a bed and breakfast down here somewhere, we can stay there for a bit."

"Oh," Elle said, and then she fell silent.

♦

The monster had killed again and the first part of its victim it ate were the eyes. It took them into its mouth, swallowed and then waited for a moment. Then the eyes appeared in the sockets in the creature's face. It looked towards her. She couldn't move, not here, she couldn't escape... The monster shuddered and then turned away from her. It doubled over and retched and then two green eyes came out of its mouth and plopped down onto the mud. When it turned back to her its eye sockets were wide and empty again. The monster reached for her...

Elle woke up gasping for breath. She looked wildly around the room, not recognising where she was. "Alec?!" she called desperately. "Alec!"

He wasn't in the bed. She flung the duvet off and scrambled out of bed; she went to the wardrobe and opened it up, looking for her clothes. When she heard the bedroom door open she spun around, ready to throw herself at whoever was there.

She laughed in relief when she saw Alec. "Where have you been?" she asked. "I had a dream..."

"You always have dreams, Elle," Alec said tiredly. He closed the door and moved into the room, sitting down on the bed. "I've just been downstairs. We've missed breakfast."

"I saw the creature from the lake," Elle told him, "In my dream! Listen to me, we have to go back there. We have to kill it or it's going to come after us and it's going to kill us and eat us and leave our eyes for the fishes! Listen to me!"

"I'm sick of listening to you!" Alec snapped. "I just want to get on with my life and you always, *always*..."

"This isn't my fault!" Elle cried, suddenly indignant. "We have to kill this thing, I have *seen* what it can do, what it *will* do to us unless we kill it!"

"I've been up most of the night," Alec said, turning away from her. "I'm going back to bed."

"Well I'm going back to the house," Elle declared. She stood and waited, for Alec to say he would join her, or for him to try and stop her... She watched as he got back into bed and said nothing. "I'm going," she said quietly. And she went.

♦

Elle trudged back up the lane, walking with her arms protectively around herself. She glanced back over her shoulder every time she heard a noise, paranoid that the creature had found her already, was following her and would devour her at any moment...

It started to rain and Elle cursed and wished she'd thought to bring a coat. Her feet splashed wet mud up her legs as she walked, covering her jeans. She buried her hands in her sleeves and kept her head down against the driving rain.

She'd reached the top of the lane and the sign for the bed and breakfast when she stopped and realised that she didn't actually know the way back to the house from here.

"Damn," Elle muttered. She wiped rainwater from her eyes and peered down the road, first one way and then the other, trying to remember which way she and Alec had come. With a resigned sigh she turned and headed back down the lane.

The monster was waiting for her, there in the middle of the lane. For a moment she thought it was a trick of the light, just strange shadows cast by the tall trees at the sides of the lane. Then it opened its mouth and keened, a long pitiful sound full of sorrow and loss which sent several birds fleeing from their roosts and disappear, cawing harshly, into the sky.

Elle shook her head desperately, her breath caught in her throat... She couldn't draw her eyes from the creature and the two yawning sockets in its face.

"Please," she managed to gasp out. *Please don't hurt me.*

Water ran from the creature, flowing smoothly over its grey skin before pooling on the ground beneath its feet. Gills on the creature's neck opened and closed and breathed out sticky bubbles of air and mucus.

The creature doubled over and it coughed and struggled like a cat trying to bring up a hairball. Elle watched in horror as two very small eyes plopped from its mouth. *Cat's eyes...*

Elle ran then, she darted past the monster as it retched, and screamed as it grasped at her leg. "No!" she cried, shaking the thing off of her, pushing at its wet skin to get away.

She ran towards the bed and breakfast, not looking back. She could hear the monster following her, she could hear its bare feet splashing in puddles and splattering mud as it ran.

She reached the door, her wet hands slipping on the handle for a moment before she pulled it opened and disappeared inside.

♦

"There's a monster in the lane outside," Elle told the receptionist, not caring that she was dripping over the guestbook. "You have to call the cops..."

"A monster," the receptionist said, smiling. "Of course."

"I've seen it!" Elle said. "It looks like a fish... well, it looks like a human really, but also a fish... You must've heard about it on the news?! Heard the stories?!"

Elle could see that the woman was still smiling fixedly so she rolled her eyes. "Forget it," she spat. She turned and headed upstairs and along the corridor to her room. Alec didn't answer to her knock, so she unlocked the door and went inside, not bothering to be quiet.

"Alec! It's here, I've seen..." she started.

There was an arc of blood splashed across the wall behind the bed and a crimson trail of it led across the room to the window. "Alec?" Elle called tentatively.

Her heart pounded as she padded across the room leaving wet footprints on the beige carpet. She pushed the window open as wide as it would go and peered down at the ground below. The rain came down heavily and bounced off the courtyard and the sodden patio furniture.

Elle chewed her lip anxiously. "Alec!" she called loudly. The sudden bark of a dog made her jump and she pulled the window closed quickly before she turned and ran from the room and back downstairs.

The receptionist glanced up briefly from the magazine she was reading but Elle ignored her and headed outside, snatching up an umbrella from the stand by the door as she went.

There was no sign of the monster outside. Elle fumbled with the umbrella, managing to get it up with shaking hands, then she headed around the outside of the bed and breakfast to the back of the building.

Rain battered against her and she shivered. "Alec!" she called again, desperately. "Alec, please!" She listened, trying to hear over the roar of the weather. She strained all her senses, hoping...

"*Elle!*"

"Alec!" Elle cried. She ran onto the courtyard, tossing her umbrella aside. He called for her again and she stopped suddenly, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

"Elle!" he called again, weakly. "Elle..."

She approached him cautiously; everything inside her screaming out that this was some sort of trick, that something wasn't right...

"Alec?" she said. Then she saw him. He was slumped back against the wall of the bed and breakfast with his head bowed and blood pumping from a wound to his neck. Her heart ached and she went to him, taking his face gently in her hands and raising it so he would look at her.

His eyes were gone. Tears of blood ran in rivulets down his cheeks from his eyeless sockets. "Elle?" he asked.

Elle gasped and scrabbled backwards, slipping on the wet patio slabs in her haste. "No!" she sobbed.

"Elle!" Alec said again, reaching for her desperately. "Help me!"

Elle shook her head silently; she could feel the blood pounding in her ears, louder than the rain around her. *Run,* she thought.

"I'll... I'll get someone," she told Alec. "I'll get help!" Elle pulled her gaze away from him and hurried from the courtyard.

She ran back around the building, her vision blurred with tears and the rain, thinking only that the receptionist would have to believe her when she saw Alec!

Elle skidded to a halt and screamed in terror when the creature leapt out in front of her suddenly. It landed on all fours and then drew itself up to stand over her. Needle teeth glinted in its cruel mouth as it smiled at her. Elle met its gaze. The creature looked at her with eyes so dark they were almost black. She screamed and then saw no more.

Night Dance

Dance in the darkness, lash out with your teeth
Show me what is there underneath
I'm not afraid, the dark gives you power
You're just a slave of the broken hours
Watch me walk into the light
Walk away from our constant fight
You with your teeth, me with my eyes
And the pulse in between us as the sun slowly dies
Touch me and tell me it's meant to be
That nothing compares to you and to me
Then hide like a coward in the heat of the day
Your embers die as the night fades away.

Demonstation

May looked over her notes again with a heavy sigh. It was far from her ideal job, going around offices full of people who didn't want to be there any more than she did trying to convince them that the all in one workstation was just what they needed.

She carefully ironed her suit before putting it on; then carefully applied make-up to her youthful skin. She looked immaculate, or she would have if she'd been able to shape a genuine smile on her face.

May carried the box into the lift, smiling politely at others in there as was the unspoken custom; no over-familiar behaviour, but a courteous acknowledgement just in case the elevator cord snapped and plunged everyone toward a certain death where they could forever ponder that their last action on earth had been to ignore a fellow human being.

"They're waiting for you, go on in," the receptionist told her in a nasal tone. May worried she was late, she checked her watch, then worried it was slow. She hated that this job created that nervous energy in her no matter how hard she tried to tell herself she didn't care.

"This will fulfil all of your copying, faxing, scanning and printing needs," she told the assembled group, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Freeing up office space, and the wireless network capability will ensure that it complies with strict new health and safety laws regarding loose cables."

"How about a demonstration?" asked one of the younger men, clearly hoping this would take up some more time before he had to go back to actually doing his job.

"Sure," May said, plugging it in, tapping a few buttons and flicking up the lip on her laptop. She printed out some photographs, scanned in a report that was sitting on the table, copied it and faxed it to a machine in the corner of the room.

"Impressive," said the same guy with a bored sigh. "We'll take six."

May smiled. "We have a number of payment options available," she told the group, relieved that her sales pitch had worked. All she had to do was get the machine into the offices.

One of the older men handed her a cheque. She smiled and promised next-day delivery, then placed the machine back in its box, her laptop back in its case and left, nodding politely to others in the lift again on the way down. When she was back in her car the machine's screen lit up, showing the now familiar snarling face.

"Six is a start," she told it. "You'll soon have infiltrated all the office blocks in the city, and I'll have repaid my debt," she told it. She admired her skin in the rear-view mirror once more as she left the car park. It felt good not to see a seventy-seven year old face looking back at her. The Demonstation™ cackled before the display went blank again, ready for another demonstration.

Glass Jars

He killed people and kept their eyes
in glass jars of various size.
He took out their brains and kept those too,
put some in jars and ate a few.
He peeled off their skins, cut their hair,
filled more jars and put them everywhere.
In his lab and in his room,
in the cupboard with the broom.
I couldn't move in that bloody place
for all the glass jars invading the space.
I wanted a normal house, I said.
Not one full of bits of the dead.

The Report

Help me

The message flashed onto the screen suddenly, interrupting the flow of her typing. She frowned. The box on the screen pulsed lightly and insistently.

Help me

She clicked on the X in the corner of the message and it disappeared. Probably just sent to the wrong person again, she thought. With a surname like Smith it was a regular occurrence. Usually one of the shiny-suited kids from Sales, too busy trying to crack one of the admin girls or texting on their omnipresent phones to check their recipient before sending an internal communication.

She sighed. She'd ignore that one, but the next one to interrupt her flow would receive an angry message back.

The report she was working on waited for her on the screen. Her fingers hovered for a while before she admitted defeat. The message's unexpected arrival had broken her chain of thought. Angrily, she stood, picked up her coffee mug and stalked across the large office to the machine.

Her shoes made hissing noises on the carpet as she moved across the empty room. Working late was almost a luxury for her. No childish office banter, no forced jollity with people she had little in common with. She had been pleased when she had arrived from a day of meetings to find the place deserted and her reports untouched. Now it was late and the building was empty, save for the one security guard on the front desk. She doubted that he knew she was here.

The coffee was bitter and she grimaced as she drank, taking in the large, open plan room bathed in harsh strip-lights. Her cubicle was roughly in the middle of the office, low fabric backed walls meaning that usually when she sat down all she could see was a sea of heads, all around her. None of them registering her presence.

Now, she thought as she sat down, she was the epicentre. The one remaining professional in a graveyard of deserted chairs and empty coffee mugs. She liked the idea of being the epicentre, the pivot on which the company rotated. Idly, she fantasised about one of the directors finding her here alone, working diligently and without complaint. She imagined his praise, his sudden interest in her reports. The look on his face as he made a mental note to consider her for promotion.

She sighed happily and took her place back at her desk.

I'm drowning

The small box in the centre of her screen pulsed urgently. She sighed, putting her coffee down carelessly and spilling a little over her hand. "Shit!" she cursed, shaking her hand to cool it off.

She glared at the screen and instantly hit the 'reply' icon.

She typed swiftly, stabbing her fingers down onto the keys angrily.

Please check your recipient! She typed *Your messages are interrupting my work and delaying vital reports.*

She hit 'send' with a small sense of satisfaction. She had just begun to type again when a message flashed back.

Please check your recipient! Your messages are interrupting my work and delaying vital reports. She frowned and rolled her eyes. Snatching up the telephone she dialled the IT helpdesk, anticipating being able to vent her anger on them.

The line rung... and rung... and rung. "Twenty-four hour service," she grumbled. "Yeah, right." She slammed the receiver down in annoyance and turned back to the screen.

Help me

The message repeated. She cursed loudly and clicked the message off the screen. Immediately she began typing furiously at her report, ignoring the small flags at the corner of the screen telling her she had unread messages. She smiled, the annoyance of not being able to deal with the messages seemed to have broken the writer's block she was having with the report. Her fingers stabbed quickly at the keys as she typed, almost frenzied in her activity.

Message inbox full

The message on the screen stopped her typing. She cursed again and opened the small inbox at the side of her screen. Her eyes widened as she saw the long list of unread mail.

Help me

I'm drowning

Help me

Help me

Help me

I'm drowning

Help me

Help me

Help me

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

I'm drowning

Her fingers hovered over the keys again. Eventually she typed, *Who are you?* and hit 'send' before she could think about it too much.

There was only a brief pause before the message icon sprung up. She clicked on it reluctantly.

Who are you?

She sighed in exasperation. Either her messages were being bounced for some reason... or there was someone else here, trying to stop her completing her report.

Her face froze. That was it! There was someone else here, someone else determined for promotion deliberately trying to sabotage her! She stood up quickly and scanned the wide room.

There was no-one. She stormed from her cubicle and started to open up the management offices. All of them empty, all deserted. She checked under desks, just in case someone was hiding.

She came to the directors offices... surely nobody would be audacious enough to be sending her messages from one of the directors computers?! Her hand hovered over the door-handle, building the courage to enter. This was hallowed territory after all, she had only been inside these offices once... many

years ago when she was being shown around the building on her first day, resplendent in her cheap suit with the too-long trousers.

She cringed at the memory of greeting the directors with red cheeks and a stuttered greeting. Their kind, patronising welcomes and hopes that she would forge a successful career with the company. That was seven years ago and still she remained un-noticed in the middle cubicle... not so much a pivot on which the company rotated, but more of a stone. Reliable but unmoving. Unremarkable, flawed.

She sighed a deep sigh into the silence and opened the door to the first office. She gasped in shock when she saw Alan Lawrence, Director of finance sitting at his desk and tapping at his laptop.

Her surprise was matched by his as he looked up. "Liz!" he said, folding the computer screen down. "I wasn't expecting to see you here for a while."

She tried not to let the joy that he remembered her name show on her face. "Sir," she stuttered. "I mean... Mr Lawrence. I was working late... I heard a noise." She suddenly felt acutely aware of how foolish she must have looked creeping into the room. "I'm sorry."

He stood up. "Why are you working late, Liz?" he asked. She smiled at the genuine interest in his voice and felt a blush creep up her cheeks.

"A report, for you, sir," she stammered, wishing desperately that she could sound confident in his presence. "Financial forecasts for the next quarter."

He smiled. "That's excellent, Liz, I admire your diligence." He closed the laptop completely. "Is the report finished, can I see it?"

She nodded vigorously. "Oh yes, sir. It's finished. I can print it off now for you if you'd like?"

"That would be extremely helpful," he said, smiling at her again. "Thank you."

She smiled back, feeling her face burning with pride. She left the office quickly and headed back to her cubicle.

He watched her leave and then picked up the phone. He pressed the button marked 'Security.' "Dave?" he said quietly, after checking that she had definitely gone. "We've got a problem. Please can you phone the relevant people and then join me up on 11? Carefully though, stay out of sight if you can." He replaced the receiver and walked to the wide, empty office.

He could see her in the middle of the room, just her head bobbing gently over the top of the fabric covered cubicle separators. He approached carefully and sat down, pulling a chair from another cubicle and watching as she prepared the document for printing.

"I would have had it completed earlier, but I've been having problems with pranksters abusing the internal memo system," she told him. She smiled inwardly when she thought of the consequences that the saboteurs would face. "Look at this."

He leaned in and looked at the messages. Every one of them was prefixed with "Sent by: Smith_E" and the time sent. He kept his face deliberately neutral.

"How did your appointments go today, Liz?" he asked.

"Appointments?" she repeated, a puzzled expression, then realised she shouldn't look disorganised in his presence. "Oh yes, very well," she smiled. "It's been a busy day."

She handed him the report, he glanced at it briefly. "This looks great," he said, deliberately keeping his voice warm and calm. "Thank you for putting the extra time in for me."

She felt herself blush deeply again. "It's nothing sir, I relish my work here, I really do."

"I know you do, all the directors are aware of you," he assured her. "Your diligence is almost unique in this organisation."

She smiled and found she couldn't look him in the eye. "Thank you, sir."

He noticed the figures standing in the doorway and inwardly sighed with relief. He picked her coat up from the back of the chair. "I think it's home time, Liz, you've done plenty for today."

She nodded and looked over to the doorway. "Who are they?" she asked, wondering if they were the ones trying to sabotage her work. "Do they work for you?"

"In a way," he said, steering her gently towards them. "Liz, you remember Dr Turner don't you? He's been looking after you since that funny turn you had in the office a few weeks ago."

She nodded. "Dr Turner," she repeated carefully. "My appointment." The doctor took her arm gently and led her from the office. "Come on, Liz, you can tell me all about the work you've been doing."

She smiled happily as he led her to the ambulance. "Mr Lawrence was very pleased with my report," she told him. "He said my diligence was almost unique!"

"I think I'll get promoted soon," she added in a conspiratorial whisper, glancing around to make sure nobody was eavesdropping on the conversation.

Lawrence stood sadly looking at the report. The front cover was laminated and embossed. "Financial projections 2008- 09."

He flicked through the twenty pages of writing, all separated neatly into sections.

"Help me…..I'm drowning…..help me…..I'm drowning…..help me…..I'm drowning"

Even the same amount of dots in between each statement. He sighed and walked back to his office. Opening the filing cabinet he placed the report in the bulging folder marked "Elizabeth Smith – Sickness absence reports."

He pushed the drawer closed and locked it, flicking the lights off carelessly as he left the office.

Fall into the Shadows

Fall into the shadows,
Submit to their might,
Their arms will caress you,
Even as they bite.

Forget all the warnings,
Whatever you've been told,
For all that they're dangerous,
They're a sight to behold.

Be entranced by their beauty,
Those immortal eyes,
Allow them to take you,

You are their prize.

Now live among them,
Share their hunger and feasts,
Be one of those mythical,
Magical beasts.

You are part of the shadows,
A true ancient clan,
All living forever,
Since this world began.

So watch from the darkness,
As the world lives in light,
Its blood shall sustain you,
All through the night.

From a Journal Found in the Dark

I ate spiders. I think that's the thing that makes me shiver the most, remembering the feel of them in my mouth or a leg hanging over my lips. I had to be quick with the spiders. Sometimes I'd grab them and hurry them towards my mouth but they were gone already, escaped from the cracks between my fingers.

I dreamt of escape myself, over and over, finding a way out, a crack wide enough for me to squeeze through.

Light filtered in from way above and the stalactites cast shadows like prison bars across the stony ground.

I'd shouted of course, soon after the accident. I shouted until I couldn't shout anymore. I used to wonder if anybody realised I was missing, and then I would wonder if anybody believed I was still alive.

Like I said, I ate spiders. And frogs sometimes, little pale things that caught my eye in the gloom.

When it rained I could catch water that fell from cracks above. When it didn't rain I would lick slime from the rocks. It wasn't so bad. After a while you stop caring.

I tried climbing out, several times, but even when I'd climbed as far as I could go it still wasn't far enough. There was no way out. I fell once and hit my head. I have no idea how long I was out cold for. There is no time down in the cave.

I'd tried digging too. I'd dig until my nails ripped and my hands bled. I moved rocks for days, just the small ones, the ones I could lift. I moved them but more would fall and fill the gaps. It was hopeless, but I didn't give up hope. I couldn't. If I didn't have hope then I didn't have anything to live for, and I didn't want to die.

I ate spiders and frogs and translucent bugs and thin, spindly plants. I licked slime off rocks and I cried into the dark.

I didn't speak. Sometimes it was dark for days and I would sit and hug my knees and stare widely at nothing. It's easy to imagine things in the dark. I didn't speak because I was scared of hearing a reply. There could have been monsters down there with me, ghosts, creatures lost...

I wrote stories, when there was enough light, and I escaped for a time, absorbed in my land of make believe. I remember once that the nib of my pencil broke and I wept as if my mother had died.

The rocks were good to me then. I smashed them against one another until I broke one and made a jagged edge that I could sharpen my pencil with. Even the memory makes me smile; I don't think I've ever been that happy in my life.

I ate spiders. But I would imagine them to be something else. Berries, mostly, it was easiest to think of them like that because they popped between my teeth.

Every day I dreamt of escape. Every night. I live in fantasy now and so I write this as if I am free.

Under the Lake

I saw the hand in the lake
And I stared.
Followed it with my eyes,
as it waved

I watched as it broke the surface
In silent waves.
Then sunk into the frozen darkness,
still, I watched

Hours, hours later I sat
Shivering with cold.
Waiting to see the hand again,

breaking the surface

When darkness fell it was there again
Ripples dancing slowly.
Blackened fingers beckoned me in,
to the lake

Now I lay in the freezing water
Deep and black.
I can see friends searching for me but
I can't scream.

The hands hold me in the dark
Under the surface.
And I writhe and fight but nothing escapes,
nothing but ripples.

Author Bios

Jo Robertson really hates writing bios. Some things she enjoys more are horror movies, tormenting random people in bars with her karaoke efforts, wearing black and sitting around on the sofa with her sister drinking wine. She skilfully disguises her creative side in her day to day work, choosing to release it stealthily at home by writing with varying degrees of success, and painting with almost an exclusive lack of success. She is mildly addicted to changing her hair colour and was once approached in a Parisian bar by the owner of a burlesque agency enquiring whether she would like to earn money by spinning around nude in a giant champagne glass. She is currently still considering this offer.

Joleen Kuyper has been writing stories and poems for a long time but it's only in recent years she has been using a computer to do so. This was a very fortunate development for her, as Joleen's handwriting is more difficult to decipher than most types of hieroglyphic – usually even she can't read it. Her imagination tends to get carried away sometimes, so she relies on long evenings with lots of red wine to help keep her grounded. Her husband, dogs and cats have learned to live with her strange ways, although she suspects this may be because she's a good cook. On occasion, she also enjoys painting purple streaks in her hair and wearing shoes with really big heels even though she's already quite tall.

E.J. Tett is the author of *The Kingdom of Malinas*, a young adult fantasy novel that contains neither wizards nor vampires, but does have a really big dragon and lots of sword fights. She would like to point out that she does not enjoy wine, cooks very badly, and has never been asked to dance nude in Paris, though she has done a photo shoot involving a camel... in Somerset.